



# Redirecting direct selling: High-touch embraces high-tech

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## KEYWORDS

Direct selling;  
Social media;  
Social media strategy;  
Facebook;  
YouTube;  
Twitter

**Abstract** Direct selling, defined as a sales channel without a fixed retail location, was built on the premise of leveraging an individual's social networks. This industry is being redirected by embracing social media; here, the challenge lies in providing the benefits of face-to-face selling, augmented by social media. An examination of the *Direct Selling News* 'Global 100 Top Direct Sellers' found that Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter represent the most widely employed social networks in the industry. While 76% of direct sellers utilize social media for promotional purposes, 55% use it for recruiting new distributors and 42% use it for reactive purposes. Consumers are the most popular target for social media, followed by distributors and communities. Social media has evolved as a driver of strategy, and will become even more important in the future. Improved customer relationships are developing by listening and reacting to concerns. The transparency created by social media is enhancing trust and ethical organizational cultures. Finally, consumer brand communities are emerging that increase brand value.

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## 1. Direct selling

Direct selling is big business, with over 15 million people generating \$30 billion in U.S. sales and \$114 billion worldwide (Direct Selling Association, 2011). As a sales channel featuring no fixed retail location, direct selling is viewed as a high-touch activity whereby the vast majority of sales are placed either in person or via a representative's webpage. And while home shopping parties are

widely recognized within the direct-to-consumer channel, approximately 70% of the industry's sales occur in a one-to-one manner where the product is presented to a single customer (Direct Selling Association, 2011). Products sold through direct selling channels are diverse and include cosmetics, home decorating products, kitchen tools, apparel and accessories, health and wellness items, and even legal and financial services (Ponder, 2011). Mad Money's Jim Cramer stated on CNBC: "Direct selling has never gotten its due from Wall Street. It is time to recognize that the direct sales model works, and works well" (Johnson, 2011, p. 10). Perhaps as a testament to this newly recognized view, Warren Buffet purchased The Pampered Chef—a direct seller

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of kitchen items—for his conglomerate, Berkshire Hathaway.

Direct selling relies on a network of contacts to generate leads and promote products. Thus, one can argue that direct selling is the original social networking business (Ponder, 2011). For over 150 years, the direct selling industry has relied largely on distributors working out of their homes to sell products through their social connections. Personalized presentations are created for products that have competitive advantages which differentiate them from those available in retail stores. Direct sellers have maintained a competitive edge because of their skills in connecting with people, an industry-wide focus on business ethics, and the trust they garner through word-of-mouth networking. The direct selling industry was built on a premise of leveraging an individual's social networks to create successful sales opportunities (Leonardi, 2010).

With more than 1 billion social media users in existence, nearly 50% of Americans age 11+ have a presence on at least one social networking site. And, approximately 33% of these individuals visit their social networking sites several times per day (Leonardi, 2010). Challenging the direct selling industry are consumers between the ages of 20 and 40—Gen X and Gen Y—who perceive tablet computers, smartphones, texting, and social networks as a way of life, both at work and at home (Dodd, 2010). Social media users are getting older, with an average age in the low to mid 30s, depending on the outlet; for example, Twitter users tend to be younger than Facebook users, but LinkedIn users are the oldest: in their late 30s (Seale, 2010). With technology so woven into the lives of these consumers, opportunities are constantly emerging for managing relationships in the dynamic digital world. Distant friends and family are now in a close circle of communication through social networking tools. Even neighbors may replace backyard socializing with messages on Facebook and Twitter. New technologies, employed via mobile and social media platforms, have the potential to change the traditional one-to-one personal selling experience.

From an industry perspective, the challenge lies in how to continue to provide the benefits of face-to-face selling while augmenting the sales process with social media. Prior to the aforementioned technological advances in social connections, direct selling was limited to physical places, person-to-person encounters, and direct selling parties held in someone's home or in a meeting room (Day, 2011). Now, customers can share information about products and brands, and distributors can use tools like mobile devices to educate, sell, and provide services to their customers.

Social media is being used in different ways by direct selling companies to reach a variety of stakeholders. For example, Cutco Corporation—which sells high-quality knives, flatware, and other accessories—views Facebook as an important mechanism for recruiting sales representatives on college campuses. XanGo—a global nutrition company—uses social networking for communication with distributors and customers, and several of its executives have Facebook pages. The mobile movement is bringing still another dimension to direct selling. Nu Skin—a developer/seller of anti-aging skincare and nutritional supplements—has a mobile application to provide a comprehensive, full-service communication package for shipping, presenting, and tracking. With this application, distributors can view videos, and enlist new customers and distributors from a mobile device (Glenn, 2011). Social networking sites allow users to create personal profiles, as well as send emails and text messages to one another (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Since these messages can include photos, videos, and podcasts, the medium exists to simulate a person-to-person sales dyad and even establish a distribution channel.

The purpose of this article is to examine how direct selling companies are using social media to reach consumers, distributors, and the broader community of stakeholders. We analyze how the top 100 direct selling companies—based on sales—use social media in promoting products and recruiting potential distributors, and communicate reactively to consumers' questions and concerns. Additionally, we suggest best practices for using social media in direct selling.

## 2. What is social media, and who uses it?

Although social media is used widely in our personal lives, a common understanding of how to use it effectively in business is still emerging. To date, social media has been dominated by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, but this dynamic area changes rapidly. At a basic level, social networking is one big community that allows users to interact with one another and share content. From a business perspective, social networking allows companies to talk to their customers and enables customers to talk to one another as an extension of word-of-mouth communication (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Social networking sites are leveraging direct selling to reach social networks of family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors, thus extending the reach of direct selling (Glenn, 2011).

Individuals and organizations use social media for various reasons, and in diverse ways. For example, the former tend to utilize social media as a means of connecting and communicating with family and friends. The information they share often includes status updates regarding day-to-day activities, personal opinions, photos, videos, and/or website links. Particularly on Facebook, individual users spend a great deal of time playing games such as *Farmville*, *Bejeweled*, and *MobWars*. Individuals may also use the chat function to communicate with friends and family in real time, and dedicate considerable time to reading and commenting on other individuals' posts. Generally speaking, individuals use social media to project their opinions, interests, and dislikes.

Increasingly, however, consumers are using the Internet for pre-purchase information gathering. While a study by the Keller Fay Group and Google (Day & Emmert, 2011) showed that over 80% of word-of-mouth brand dialogue still occurs face-to-face, online brand communities are effective tools for influencing sales, regardless of whether these communities are company brand sponsored or independent sites on social networks (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010). When consumers have awareness and interest in a product, the pre-search is more likely to incorporate a social media site than a traditional search engine. This is supported by an Econsultancy poll, which found that in researching product reviews, 90% of consumers trust online recommendations written by people they know and 70% trust those they do not (Glenn, 2011). Adding fuel to this online firestorm, Nielsen Online discovered that the #1 driver for trust in a brand is online reviews and feedback from social media sites (Nielsenwire, 2010).

In contrast, organizations use social media in a less intimate manner; however, these methods may possibly appear intrusive to individual users. For instance, firms currently employ social media as yet another avenue to advertise and promote products/services to target markets. On Facebook, organizations try to sway users to 'like' their pages by offering exclusive deals and promotions. Some companies have also attempted to be more personal and converse with individual users who proactively 'like' their pages. Of course, it is also common for firms to use social media as a means of remedying consumers' concerns regarding faulty products or sub-par services; this reactive approach is an effective way for organizations to improve their reputations. Additionally, organizations are using social media as a form of marketing research to learn how consumers perceive their products/services and overall image.

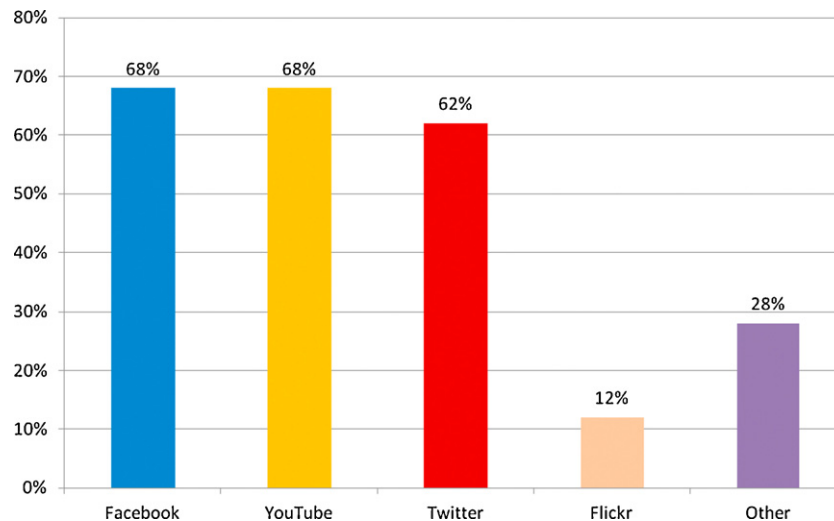
## 2.1. The need for an integrated 'who and what' social media strategy

While platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have emerged as top sites for most companies, these too often are treated as stand-alone marketing tools rather than as an integrated part of the sales strategy (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). And although customers are utilizing social media platforms, many executives do not understand what they are; the various forms they can take; and how to enact strategies to monitor, understand, and grow sales (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). In the direct selling marketplace, social media sites are generally used as a means to communicate with distributors and consumers. For example, Mary Kay uses its social media platform to primarily engage customers, and Scentsy—purveyor of home fragrances—considers its major success to be fan pages for consumers. The previously mentioned XanGo focuses on Facebook and Twitter for existing customers as a retention tool, and Amway views social media to be important in developing brands. ViSalus Sciences—the self-proclaimed #1 weight loss and fitness challenge platform in North America—is likewise using social media tools for recruitment and to help distributors manage their businesses (Glenn, 2011).

While it is clear that social media is used in almost all communications and promotions, as well as recruiting and managing distributors, managers in the direct selling industry do not appear to have resolved the challenge of integrating social media with the person-to-person foundational building blocks of the industry's business model. Customers and distributors are changing how they communicate within their social networks, and this requires direct selling companies to create a balance in their own communication methods (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Yet, traditional marketers and advertising experts are not necessarily social media experts, and that is especially true in the world of direct selling. At the same time, a strategic social media plan is likely to adopt a variety of different media vehicles (Gilliam, 2011).

## 3. A handshake and a tweet

In order to analyze the use of social networks in the direct selling industry, we employed the *Direct Selling News* (DSN) 'Global 100 Top Direct Sellers' list as a database; these 100 firms represent wholesale revenue of \$66 billion and 43 million distributors (Emmert, 2011). The methodology to assess use of social media followed a rigorous, emergent

**Figure 1.** Percentage of top 100 direct selling companies that utilize specific social networking sites

model structure. We first looked at a company's webpage to see if the company included any social media icons that would link users to corporate social media pages. If an icon was included, a simple click enabled us to directly access the company's social media page. From there, we examined the types of interaction and elements on the page. For example, many Facebook pages linked users to information on causes they were supporting, polls that asked users questions, and links to product webpages. We classified the company's interaction with stakeholders by looking at the type of communication: reactive (e.g., reacting to user posts, asking questions of consumers), promotional (e.g., using advertisements, promoting products, engaging in cause-related marketing), or recruitment (e.g., encouraging users to become distributors or sales representatives). We also classified stakeholders targeted by direct sellers into three groupings: consumers, distributors, and communities. *Consumers* purchase products for end use consumption. *Distributors* encompass all sales representatives and supply chain members that sell to end consumers. *Communities* include the broader stakeholder public; online communication here might include a company's involvement in philanthropic activities. For instance, MonaVie LLC—a manufacturer/marketer of health and wellness products—has information on its Facebook page about the MORE project, a charity that MonaVie partnered with to help provide hope for impoverished families in Brazil. Such cause-related marketing could serve to enhance the reputation of a company as an ethical organization.

If the company's webpage did not contain any social networking icons, we searched the major social networking sites—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube,

Flickr, Tumblr, Myspace, and more—as well as blogs to see if a corporate webpage was available. After the data were collected, we utilized multiple coders to enter the data so as to determine the ways in which direct selling companies were using social media sites to reach a variety of stakeholders. The use of social networks by individual distributors, while important, was excluded so as to focus on how the direct selling firm as a whole uses social networks.

As expected, our analysis found that Facebook and YouTube are the most widely used social networks in direct selling, with 68% of global direct selling companies having an active presence on each platform (Figure 1). Twitter was slightly lower, with 62% of the top companies using this site. Only 12% of the top 100 global direct selling companies utilize Flickr for photo sharing; however, other forms of social media are employed (e.g., blogs, Myspace, Tumblr, Picasa). In addition, 73% of the *Direct Selling News* Global 100 Top Direct Sellers focus their social media sites on consumers, 60% focus on distributors, and 25% focus on communities.

### 3.1. Selecting social media

Direct selling firms' selection of various social media appears to relate to consumers' use of the sites. For instance, Facebook's large audience provides a social media platform to capitalize on communicating with more users than via traditional avenues. With Facebook approaching 1 billion active users, and featuring ongoing changes in user interface and information accessibility, it is not surprising that direct sellers prefer this platform as the social networking contact point of choice. In contrast, the primary motive for direct selling companies to

maintain a YouTube presence is that it allows companies to engage a large audience, quickly and with ease. YouTube is more accessible than Facebook, as it does not require an account or login; indeed, YouTube videos are viewable by anyone with an Internet connection. This makes the medium a viable method of communicating with consumers and distributors via video content. For its part, Twitter has an audience that is about one-quarter the size of that of Facebook, but which still provides another effective way of communicating through short messages. However, while many active Twitter users are also very likely to hold a Facebook account, the opposite is not necessarily true. Thus, Twitter without Facebook would not be a wise choice in the social media selection process.

Flickr is the least utilized networking site we studied; this is probably because direct selling companies do not need to rely on a platform that is dedicated solely to photo sharing. Furthermore, Flickr is not the only site that allows for this function; Facebook and Twitter both offer tools via which companies can post photos for their audiences. Despite this fact, Flickr remains the top overall photo-sharing site on the Internet.

Another study finding is that 28% of the 100 top direct selling companies are using other forms of social media. This category includes media such as blogs, Myspace, Picasa, and Tumblr. Among these options, blogs are the most popular, likely because they were among the first user-friendly social media platforms to emerge. For example, Market America, Sportron, and Primerica Financial all maintain company blogs. Additionally, some direct selling companies utilize the status update tool on Facebook as a surrogate blog post. Although the status update

excerpts are notably shorter, this does enable release of a bit of late-breaking company news.

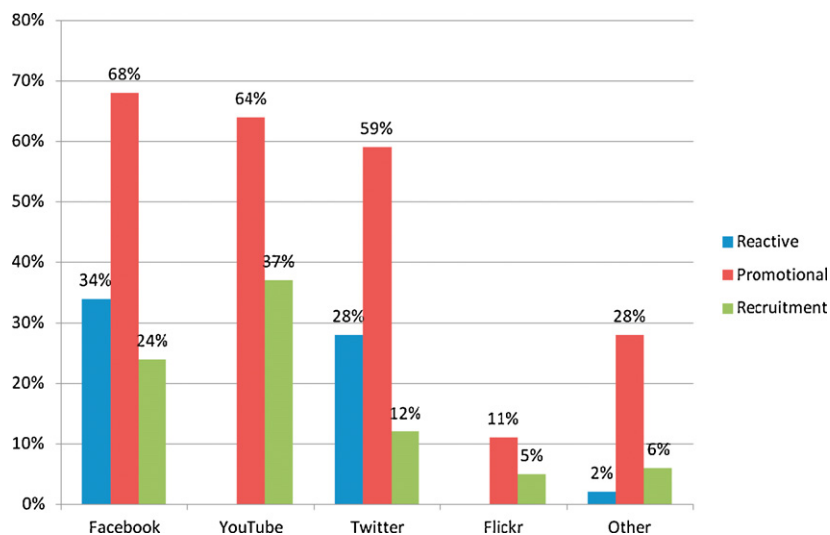
### 3.2. Using social media

Direct selling companies tend to use multiple social media sites, and many company pages use the social networks for multiple communication purposes. We assessed the use of social media by evaluating its role in the communication process. *Reactive communication* includes active engagement with social media users, *promotional communication* includes efforts to incite company/product/brand interests, and *recruitment communication* focuses on attempts to encourage users to become distributors or sales representatives. As seen in Figure 2, promotional communication activities wield the most power among the three dissemination roles.

In terms of message strategy, 42% of the top direct selling companies use social media for *reactive* purposes. This indicates that a number of firms feel comfortable openly addressing issues or supplying additional information desired by consumers. Of those direct selling companies that use Facebook, 34% use it for reactive purposes, as when direct selling jewelry company Lia Sophia responds to consumers and attempts to redirect them to its corporate website. In the same vein, 28% use Twitter for reactive purposes, including scrapbooking company Creative Memories, which has employed this avenue to respond to consumers and encourage them to vote on certain topics.

Approximately 76% of the top 100 direct selling companies utilize social media for *promotional* purposes. Many direct selling companies consider social media as a complement to traditional promotion

**Figure 2.** Types of company communication on specific social media sites that the top 100 global direct selling companies use to reach target markets





and advertising strategies; it is likely that these firms use social media as a less expensive substitute to more traditional advertising and promotion venues. Social media provides a relatively quick and easy way of posting corporate and product information for viewing by interested target markets. Promotional activity is highest on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter: the platforms that have the largest population bases and are among the most visited and valued websites. Interestingly, advocating promotional activity via these channels allows for individual users to more easily share company information with connections, as all three feature tools which allow users to read the companies' posts in their news streams and then share that information with individual contacts.

According to the data, 68% of direct selling companies employing Facebook use it for promotional goals; consider Mexican direct selling firm Omnilife, one of many companies utilizing Facebook to promote its products and provide company updates. YouTube is used primarily for promotional communication among 64% of the top 100 direct selling companies. Lastly, 59% of top direct selling companies rely on Twitter for promotional communication.

In the final communication category, 55% of direct selling firms utilize social media for *recruiting* new distributors. Forever Living Products—a manufacturer of aloe vera and bee derived products—touts its company as 'the greatest opportunity in the world.' The data show 37% of direct selling companies use YouTube for recruitment purposes. For example, UK direct selling company Kleeneze posts distributor testimonials on YouTube to attract new candidates. And Twitter is relied upon by 12% of the

top 100 direct selling companies for recruitment purposes, as Stella and Dot—an accessories firm—does through postings about becoming a 'stylist.' Social media is a less expensive alternative to traditional job search websites, while offering an efficient and effective way of reaching the elusive 20–40 year-old demographic.

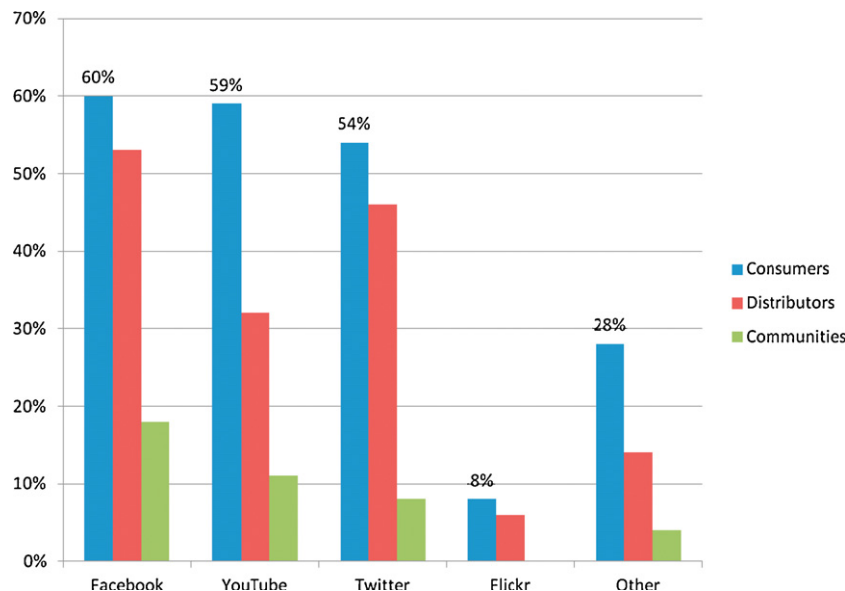
Though Flickr and YouTube fail to provide direct selling companies with an avenue of true reactivity, since their focus is on one-way communication via uploading/sharing of videos and photos, direct selling companies can still utilize Flickr in a creative manner for promotional and recruitment communication; indeed, we found that 11% use Flickr for promotional purposes, and 5% for recruitment. Avon, Keller Williams, and Tahitian Noni all employ Flickr for one or both of these purposes.

#### 4. Matchmaking: Pairing the right social media with the right stakeholder

The domination of the social media world, in general, is mirrored among direct selling companies. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are the vehicles of choice among the top 100 direct selling companies (Figure 3). These three platforms were matched clearly with the primary consumer and distributor stakeholders.

Facebook and Twitter are conducive to interactions on an intimate level. As such, these platforms offer direct selling companies a straightforward means of communicating with key stakeholders in the industry: customers and distributors. We found that direct selling companies tend to post the same

Figure 3. Stakeholders targeted through social media activities by the top 100 global direct selling companies



messages on both Facebook and Twitter, likely due to the targeting of identical audiences. The intent of this intimate two-way engagement had a product and/or company focus. For example, a consumer left a comment on one company's Facebook page: "Your advertisement and product do not match! These photos are good only from an artistic angle and trying to impress customers. Be realistic and do something to solve your customers' problems." The company responded to the customer's concerns on both Facebook and Twitter.

YouTube, with its more traditional one-way audience communication, appears to be used more effectively for recruiting consumers to become distributors. While allowing for a continued focus on the primary stakeholder audiences, the message intent of the social media usage is different. Many of the top 100 direct selling companies are leveraging YouTube as an outlet to promote and recruit new distributors. An example is Reliv—formulator and marketer of nutritional products and functional foods—which has divided its YouTube channel into four primary company-related informational categories: (1) Reliv: The Company, (2) Reliv: The Products, (3) Reliv: The Mission, and (4) Reliv: The Opportunity.

The least likely stakeholder group to be targeted by social media is the community. However, if the direct selling company is interested in targeting the community in its posts, Facebook and Twitter are the two most relied upon platforms. Recently, Scentsy conveyed its philanthropic efforts to stakeholders (consumers, distributors, and community) through Facebook and Twitter. Its posts said: "Here's the giant check being handed over! Thank you to our amazing consultants and customers for supporting this cause!"

## 5. Is there a 'best' social media for direct sellers?

The research demonstrates clearly that the industry believes Facebook is the most popular social media interface for direct selling companies. Facebook's large active population positions it as the status quo for social media sites, and its interactive tools distinguish it from the other channels. It is Facebook's dynamic platform that allows direct selling companies to interact with their key stakeholders. Company profiles on Facebook are set up with tools that were developed for firms to easily use and understand. Direct selling companies are able to post longer status updates on Facebook, which provides a better means of communicating with their audience. The status update module encourages more interaction than the

other social networks. Individual users are also able to provide immediate feedback to the companies on their latest news through either a 'like' and/or commenting on the updates.

Other social media domains are largely one-dimensional, in that they encompass a single key function. For instance, Twitter is governed by one function: the 140 character status update. This limits a direct selling company's ability to convey information cohesively. And if Twitter users want to comment on a company's status update, they must 'tag' the company in their message. This system can be cumbersome to monitor and manage for direct selling companies, as it requires time and personnel resources. On Facebook, this interaction is all connected. Ability to overlay the two platforms, however, makes Twitter a fierce second-place competitor among direct selling companies. Easy integration enables tools for an amalgamated social media plan.

Even though the research suggested that direct selling companies use YouTube as much as Facebook, the payback for YouTube engagements is more difficult to assess via online content. YouTube videos tend to stand alone and are more difficult to integrate within an overall social media strategy. However, Facebook offers a multimedia function that will allow direct selling companies to upload videos for distribution to stakeholders; moreover, Facebook allows for individual users to comment and/or 'like' any of the multimedia objects that the company publishes. Perhaps best of all, users may scatter such information to their contacts simply by clicking a 'share' button. Sharing on Facebook generates impressions and could potentially increase awareness for the direct selling company and its product.

### 5.1. Facebook is the choice. . .for now

Facebook is the only social media platform that operates on an open source basis for application development. It allows for direct selling companies to customize the tabs on their profile to align with their social media marketing strategies and objectives. If direct selling companies feel so inclined, they are able to program/code specific Facebook applications. For example, Mary Kay's Facebook page features a Personal Beauty Profiler application via which individual users can learn what cosmetic products would best complement particular facial structures. This aspect differentiates Facebook from all the other social media websites with respect to customization opportunities.

Facebook has also integrated several different interactive tools that direct selling companies can leverage to their benefit in encouraging two-way communications with individual users. These tools

include Questions, Discussions, Reviews, and the Wall. *Questions* allow direct selling companies to ask their audience anything they want and receive answers; the function may also serve as an interactive poll. *Discussions* and the *Wall* are similar in that they both encourage users to communicate their thoughts and concerns; however, they differ in that the former is portrayed as a forum where individuals converse on specific topics, whereas the latter does not encompass a defined topic. Facebook allows for individual users to write reviews on the direct selling company and its products. Reviews are made public; thus, not many direct selling companies use this tool. However, employing the *Reviews* tool is not without merit. For example, the direct selling company can be notified if a dissatisfied consumer writes a review on Facebook and thereby immediately attempt to rectify the problem. When individual users post on third-party websites, it can take time to discover the review, making it increasingly more difficult to be reactive.

In the eyes of direct selling companies, one of Facebook's most critical components is its Insights function. *Insights* provide direct selling companies with metrics and statistics regarding the general trends and visits that are taking place on the Facebook profile. This allows for companies to recognize "and analyze trends within user growth and demographics, consumption of content, and creation of content" (Facebook, 2011). Direct selling companies can leverage this information to develop strategies for increasing awareness about and interaction on their page.

The large population Facebook has amassed and the numerous tools it has incorporated into its platform allow direct selling companies to communicate with all stakeholders on different levels. No other social media avenue allows for this dynamic of interaction with individual users; indeed, the other channels are grounded in one or two limiting functions. Generally speaking, Facebook is more of an open source social media platform than the others, and thus allows direct selling companies to customize it to their needs and wants when interacting with different stakeholders.

## 6. Social media is truly a driver of strategy for direct selling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

*Addressability*, defined as the ability to identify and communicate with customers before they make a purchase decision, is critical to success in today's rapidly changing marketplace (Pride & Ferrell, 2012). Social media offers the ability to not only identify potential customers, but also customize

promotional messages that can turn clients into advocates. In direct selling, customers as advocates can benefit the bottom line by increasing both product sales and salesperson recruitment.

The accessibility dimension of direct selling allows customers to obtain digital information about products, competitors, prices, reviews, and in general be much better informed about a firm's products and their value (Pride & Ferrell, 2012). This world of direct selling is evolving around relationships that are based on listening and caring for customers. Social media requires companies and distributors to be authentic and sincere because of the evolving, transparent nature of information dissemination and sharing (Vaynerchuk, 2011). The direct selling company has to develop an ethical culture to create and maintain trust; this requires careful listening and responding to customers. Social media, via electronic word-of-mouth, has placed front-and-center the reputation of the company and its products. Social media creates dynamic relationships with customers, resulting in innovation and adaptation to keep pace with clients' changing desires, preferences, and passions for certain products. For instance, the enthusiasm of a 12-year-old who is enamored with his father's purchase of a Cutco Cutlery grilling tools set can be shared by the family through social media. The authenticity and legitimacy of the message can have a tremendous impact on those wanting to learn more about the company and its products.

Finally, the value of branding within direct selling companies can be augmented by social media. Social media has the potential to enhance the cultural dimensions of branding by helping consumers confer their own meaning onto the brand; cosmetics, health/nutrition aids, and other products for the home and family can have an emotional appeal based on symbolic language and associations. This can result in brand communities of loyal customers that communicate through social media. In fact, the term 'cultural branding' has been used to explain how a brand conveys a powerful symbolic meaning that consumers find useful in cementing identities (Holt, 2004).

Looking to the future, addressability, accessibility, and branding will continue to be critical within the direct selling context. Never before has high-touch met high-tech in such a provocative manner. Direct selling and social media are intricately connected to enable a world of shopping behavior and sales force interplay unlike anything seen in years past. Direct selling companies must embrace this new opportunity for person-to-person communication. The challenge lies in viewing social media not as a stand-alone element, but rather as a seamless



integration into the direct selling business model. The ensuing interactive dialogue will foster the implementation of the marketing concept in a vibrant, dynamic marketplace.

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